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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR BROWNFIELD'S VISIT TO ARAUCA, APRIL 29, 2008

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: The Ambassador traveled on April 29 to the oil-producing and historically conflict-plagued Department of Arauca (along the Venezuelan border) to meet with local political, security, and civil society representatives as well as to visit Occidental Petroleum's (Oxy) major production facility at Cano Limon. Interlocutors emphasized the improved security situation and the commitment among Araucan society to utilize local resources to benefit all residents. In addition to touring Cano Limon, the Ambassador received a briefing from the local military commander and visited a joint vocational program in Arauca City funded by Occidental Petroleum, Ecopetrol, and the local government. He also traveled to the municipality of Arauquita to visit a U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)-funded community center providing local residents access to public services. The visit received positive media coverage, highlighted USG and U.S. private sector assistance efforts, and underscored the improvement in conditions in Arauca. END SUMMARY.

Officials Emphasize Interest in Continued USG Assistance

¶2. (SBU) Arauca Governor Freddy Forero, Arauca City Mayor William Reyes, Arauquita Mayor Jose Vargas, and Arauca Bishop Monsenor Carlos Mesa all accompanied the Ambassador throughout his visit to Arauca. Each emphasized in their public statements and private comments the progress that Arauca has made as a result of President Uribe's "Democratic Security" policy as well as assistance from the USG on security. Governor Forero reiterated at each stop his administration's interest in utilizing the Department's resources to improve living conditions and to working more closely with the USG on economic development to consolidate the Department's security gains.

Security Improving, but Still a Challenge

¶3. (SBU) Brigadier General Jose Gonzalez briefed Ambassador Brownfield on progress on security in Arauca, highlighting the decrease in Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and National Liberation Army (ELN) attacks as well as the increase in desertions and guerrillas killed or captured. Gonzalez said his brigade had already captured 108 guerrillas in 2008 as compared to 167 for all of 2007. He noted that GOC military gains against insurgent groups had translated directly into a drop in kidnappings and that the local population increasingly felt safe to travel on the Department's roads at night. Gonzalez also pointed out the significant decrease in oil pipeline attacks from 170 in 2001 to 10 in 2007 and the lack of an attack on the electrical distribution system in over three years. (Note: The night the Ambassador's delegation departed Arauca the Cano

Limon-Covenas pipeline suffered its first sabotage attack of 2008 in Norte de Santander Department. Oxy officials consider the timing a coincidence. End Note.) Gonzalez said fighting between the FARC and ELN remained a significant security challenge and threat to the local population as the two groups fought over drug smuggling routes and resources.

Oil Production Outlook Positive

¶4. (U) Oxy Colombia President David Stangor accompanied the Ambassador on a tour of Oxy's Cano Limon oil production facility operated in partnership with state-owned hydrocarbons company Ecopetrol. Stangor outlined the field's claim as Colombia's most important oil find to date and its continuing position as a supplier of 95,000 barrels of oil per day (bpd). Since entering production in 1985, the field has produced over 1.2 billion barrels of oil, provided almost USD 2 billion in royalties to Colombia, and generated 2,300 direct and indirect jobs. Although the field's production has declined in recent years, Stangor told accompanying press that he expects to hold Cano Limon production steady and increase Oxy's overall production to 135,000 bpd by 2011 with increases from adjacent fields. Oxy also briefed the Ambassador on its USD 4.7 million environmental program which includes an extensive cleaning system for the water used in pumping operations as well as reforestation of 680 hectares of land surrounding the field.

Partnerships Promote Opportunity and Access to Services

¶5. (U) At Cano Limon the Ambassador also visited the El

Alcaravan Foundation. The Foundation's productive center was built with USAID assistance in 2006 and now receives support from Oxy, Ecopetrol, and the municipal government to provide vocational training and educational opportunities to the local community. The Foundation assists 6,000 families living near Arauca city and Cano Limon with youth and adult education, job training, technical assistance to small businesses, social counseling, and youth recreation. The Ambassador met with over 50 beneficiaries, toured stalls with examples of productive activities supported by the Foundation, and donated a library kit to the Foundation's literacy program.

6, (U) The Ambassador concluded his visit to Arauca Department with a stop in the municipality of Arauquita, once unreachable to visiting delegations due to security concerns.

In Arauquita, the Ambassador toured the municipality's community center built with assistance from USAID to provide access to public services as well as early childhood education. The center serves as a one-stop delivery point for government and social services such as citizen registry and family welfare programs. Following a presentation of the center's activities, beneficiaries provided testimonials on the impact of having regular access to public services for the first time in Arauquita's history. The Ambassador concluded the event by donating a library kit to the center's Early Childhood Learning Program.

Positive Press Coverage

¶7. (U) Traveling press from Reuters, Semana (a leading centrist weekly news magazine with a circulation of 928,000), Portafolio (a leading business daily reaching 53,300 readers), and El Espectador (a weekly newspaper converting to a daily format read by 668,000 people) accompanied the Ambassador throughout the day. The visit received positive coverage from both the traveling and local Araucan media, with stories filed by Reuters and El Tiempo the following news day. We expect Semana and El Espectador to publish in the coming days. Coverage focused on the Ambassador's positive message that his visit to the area was evidence Arauca Department has made significant progress in establishing security and that the improvements permitted USG

security funds to shift from pipeline protection to other
areas identified by the GOC.
BROWNFIELD